

# *Preserving Southern History Material*

AN ADDRESS BEFORE THE  
SOUTHERN CLUB OF  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

JULY 31, 1923

by

WILLIAM H. KILPATRICK  
*Professor of Education*

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS



## Preserving Southern History Material

It is a frequent complaint that our national history has been written too much from the New England point of view. When the subject comes up among Southerners one is likely to hear—what we now call a “defense mechanism”—that the South was in its day too busy making history to take time to write it. Whatever the explanation, it must be seriously admitted that the South's share in our history has not been adequately presented. But mere zeal of claim is not the antidote. We must do more than that. Competent Southern scholarship has often been compelled to blush at the reckless and trivial claims presented by some Southern zealots. Who among us has not at times prayed that we might be delivered from our friends?

My words this evening are intended to call attention to something practical and practicable. I am not assuming even for a moment that my audience consists of trained historians. The contrary is true of almost all of us here this evening. But I do take it that you are the more energetic among the younger Southern educators else you would not be here in the Summer School. Being thus the more energetic you are the very ones to stir your respective communities and families along the lines which I wish to present for your consideration.

The South, we agree, is seldom fairly presented in the account of any national interest or undertaking. Why? The reason is, in a nutshell, that the South has not made available its data for history writing. Let me illustrate by some instances with which I am best acquainted. Monroe's *Cyclopedia of Education*, incomparably the best of its kind that has yet appeared, deals scantily with Southern biography, but not so of choice or deliberation. When I spoke about this to the biographical editor, an impartial historian and a very good friend of mine, he replied instantly: “I know the weakness you name and I did all I could to remedy it. I searched everything that has appeared in print for every available scrap of information. I put in all that I could



find." The fault, in other words, was ours, not his. We have not written or published lives of our educational leaders. Nor have we made efforts to keep adequate data. Even where the material for writing such lives was once existent it has too often been lost. So that for all time the early educational history of our section will suffer in comparison.

Take a specific instance. It is generally accepted in this part of the world that the higher education of women in this country began with Emma Willard about 1821, was later (1837) carried to a higher level by Mary Lyon at Mt. Holyoke and reached its present height in the opening of Vassar in 1865 as the first college for women of rank equal to the colleges for men. If you ask what about Wesleyan, chartered as the Georgia Female College in 1836, the first girls' school in the world authorized to confer degrees, the most likely answer will be: "I never heard of it." If you ask one better informed, the likely reply will be, "Yes, those female seminaries, there were many of them all over the country." If you press the point and ask whether Wesleyan had any part in bringing Vassar into being, you will probably receive an incredulous denial: "How could it be?" Now I myself believe a causal connection can be established, if not between Vassar and Wesleyan, certainly between Vassar and the South. The man who persuaded Matthew Vassar to found a college and not a hospital was Milo P. Jewett, a Baptist minister, long resident in the South but returned to the North as the Civil War approached. This man had been head of the Judson Female Institute in Selma, Alabama, an institution that did not confer degrees, as did many other institutions for girls throughout the South. The scheme Jewett proposed for Vassar was called by him "the university plan" and was clearly modeled after the University of Virginia. Just before Jewett left Alabama there had been a determined effort to remake the University of Alabama on this "university plan." I have myself wished to write an article on the relative claims of Wesleyan and Vassar, and on the probable connection between the two, but I have been stopped by the failure to get what I want of Wesleyan's history. The girls who first graduated there received what was called "the first degree." Dr. Taylor, historian of Vassar, seizes on this as an admission that Wesleyan did not intend to be equal to the

men's colleges which conferred the A.B. degree. My guess is that the "first degree" was another name for the A.B. degree, with A.M. as the second degree; but I cannot as yet show it. The data is not available to me here. Early records are incomplete. Early catalogs of Wesleyan are missing. The *Macon Telegram* which till recently had complete files from 1825 has through fire lost all the volumes covering this period. So Dr. Taylor's specific rejection of Wesleyan as the first "college" for women goes till now unanswered.

One further instance of our failure to care for historic data. Some years ago I spoke to the best known historian reared in my time in Georgia about returning to Georgia to work up and make known our Georgia history. "Why go back to Georgia?" he asked, "I can study Georgia history in Wisconsin better than I can in Georgia." In other words the University and State of Wisconsin have been both more zealous and more successful in getting together material for the study of Georgia history than has any one institution in Georgia. I was astounded, and much more troubled I assure you than pleased.

What is the lesson of all this to us? What shall we do? My answer is that we must take hold, each one wherever he or she can best take hold, to remedy the evils pointed out. Each must do his part in the preserving and publishing of Southern historic material. Do you ask what we can do specifically? Let us glance first at our state and county records. The early records of Massachusetts as a contrasting example, both provincial and local, have been published with great care. Everywhere great pains have been taken to preserve and render easy of access all this valuable material. How is it with us?

Virginia, the first founded of the original thirteen states, has great wealth of material, and much has been done, particularly of late years, both to preserve it and to publish it. But on a recent visit to the state library I was shown a mass of papers estimated to contain many thousands of bounty warrants, fifty thousand as I recall, that for want of indexing are not available for use. Five thousand dollars would do the job. Sooner or later it will be done, but meanwhile they lie practically worthless. This is one item. North Carolina has done much for its colonial and early state records, and is now interesting itself in its county



records, but not all needed has been done. I went to one of the oldest counties of North Carolina. Its wills and deeds are well cared for in fire proof cases. I asked for certain other papers of the colonial period. The reply was, "They are probably out in that old outhouse you see. There are barrels and barrels full of old papers out there. Nobody knows just what." How long before some fire will destroy that old outhouse and remove forever these "old papers"? At another North Carolina court house I was examining a compiled record of certain colonial data. "Where are the originals?" I asked. "Oh, you can't get at them. They are in the cellar and that is usually flooded with water." How long, I wonder, will these valuable records survive such treatment? South Carolina lost through fire very valuable records upon the visit of Sherman to Columbia in 1865. Of recent years a very zealous and very competent historian has been at work collecting, arranging, and making available the state records. Georgia has published a goodly number of volumes of colonial and early state records, but its state library and archives department are living in cramped quarters and on a starvation budget. I would not speak so plainly if I were not myself a Georgian. As for the county records, I went to the county second, I suppose, in historic importance in the state. The oldest volume of records was falling apart for lack of a few dollars and reasonable care. For the wills there was no inclusive index. Nowhere else have I seen such neglect. I wrote to another Georgia county inquiring about *ante bellum* school records. The reply indicated more good nature in the Ordinary and more trust in me than the law should allow: the Ordinary offered to send to me in New York the original record book. I said no. Later I visited the court house and asked to see the volume. My friend's successor said, "I don't know anything about it. There are innumerable old papers piled up in that little building you see on the corner. Perhaps it is out there." Another outhouse holding invaluable records.

And yet another instance. The University of Georgia has an excellent fireproof library building, thanks, I should in fairness say, to Mr. George Foster Peabody, a native Georgian living in this city. And now all is well cared for. But the history of the library holds at least one tragedy. In former days a college library was likely to be kept well locked most of the time, and the

librarian's duties being small were generally assigned to one of the professors with a small addendum to his salary as recompense for his labors. Many years ago an amiable professor with a large family of boys was serving in this fashion at Georgia. The boys acted as deputy librarians for their father and one day they concluded to "clean up" on a grand scale. The chief item in this grand cleaning was to get together all the pamphlet literature belonging to the library, worthless old stuff they thought it, and sell it to the paper mill. The loss was not discovered till it was too late. Only those who know how large a part pamphlets played in *ante bellum* history can realize how much was forever lost by this mistaken zeal.

Next to lack of interest fire is our greatest enemy in the matter of keeping records. In the short while that I have been interested in such matters I have seen three newspaper files uniquely valuable for the *ante bellum* period of Georgia destroyed in practical completeness by fire, *The Augusta Chronicle* dating from 1785, *The Macon Telegraph* from 1826 and *The Columbus Enquirer* (from about 1828). Nothing can make good these losses. They are gone forever.

What now can we do? We in this room, what can we do? There are many things and I appeal to you to accept the responsibility and begin at once. In the first place we can advocate in season and out the preservation of historic material. Join your state historical societies. Organize county historical societies. Join the D. A. R., the Colonial Dames, the Sons of the Revolution. Locate and mark local places of historic interest. Encourage your legislators to do more for your state archives and their publication.

But let us be still more specific. The South is the section of established families. This must be our cue. The county is possibly the best unit for your effort. Start a county historical society. Genealogy is perhaps your surest basis for enlisting interest. Even so, use it for all it is worth. Collect data of local interest. Have people write out in careful form their family records. Keep scrap books for matters of local interest. See that the files of the county newspapers are kept by your Association and also that the county newspaper files—required for legal advertising—are well bound and carefully kept. See that all legal records are well kept. See that cemetery records are kept



in permanent form. A small fee as a burial permit will give somebody a personal interest in keeping it going. Publish historic data in your county newspapers. Have an annual home-coming week under the auspices of your county historical association. Enlist the school interest. In every way arouse an interest in definite historic materials.

Many of you are connected with colleges. See that records are kept in permanent form. Keep files of your catalogs, of class annuals, of commencement programs. Have in your college library scrap books that include every newspaper reference, every program, everything like a handbill, everything that will enable the future historian to reconstruct in later times the present which we now so easily take as a matter of course. Keep in touch with your alumni and whenever an alumnus dies, collect at once the essential record of his life and work.

Every one of us is a member of a family. See to it that family records are carefully kept. But don't be content merely with the space in the family bible. Keep selected family letters. Choose them for this purpose, not too many or all will be lost. Have some one keep a diary in which family reminiscences are written. Every family has some member who likes to tell of the past. Get this member to write out these reminiscences in a book. In a few generations such a volume will be priceless to your family and valuable to the historian. With increasing migrations, with the increasing shift from country to city and from house to flat or apartment, if we do not take specific care we shall transmit nothing of these more personal matters to our descendants except a few memories that will perish as the old die. It is perhaps well for my purpose that most of my hearers are women. Women have generally been the bearers of family history. In the newer civilization confronting us the woman voter and citizen must see to it that the historic element in our life be adequately cared for. We men of the South have been too much concerned with other matters to deal fairly with preserving our heritage. I believe in this respect our women citizens will greatly surpass us.

In conclusion we cannot too much stress the fact that it is our own fault if the South has not been fairly represented in history. We must begin at once to make good this deficit. The task is not easy. It requires both trained historians and adequate data.



But if we in this room do our part, we shall stir an interest that will make it easier to get both. We must be interested and must show our interest; it is active interest that counts. County historical societies are easy to form if only we will try. Family records we can collect and keep. Everywhere and all the time we can see that records are safe from fire. The responsibility for Southern history lies most with Southern teachers. What are you going to do, each of you?





71.2009.084.13195

